

Electronic Bill: printed in Drummer magazine 2009

Bill Bruford was an innovative pioneer in the electronic drum field. He embraced the technology early on and used it in an innovative and creative manner in King Crimson and his own group Earthworks, where he provided the harmony from his Simmons SDX! Bill gave Drummer his views on electronic drums.

“My first memory of electronic drums was hearing the swooping disco sound of Syndrums on a Donna Summer record, which was not a great start. Soon after that Dave Simmons produced the Simmons SDSV and subsequently developed the SDS7, SDS9 and ultimately the Simmons SDX, with each model being an improvement over its predecessor. The invention of MIDI enabled the pads to play a pitched note via a keyboard in addition to drum-type sounds. From the beginning, Dave was trying to do something much more interesting than make a facsimile of a drum kit. He didn't want them to sound like drums and I wanted them to sound even less like drums. We wanted a new instrument altogether.

Towards the end of my time with Simmons I was using the SDX which had digital sampling onboard. You could load multiple samples to pads, edit them, and access them not only under velocity (everyone could do that) but also in terms of position. So where you struck the pad was as important as how hard you struck it. It became quite sophisticated and required a huge computer with a 9" TV screen. But it could be delicate, especially when transporting it around the world, and could pack up on you. There's a hair-raising story in my autobiography where I was at Madison Square Gardens playing the world's most expensive drum kit (two SDX kits in tandem) and they stalled! That was the sort of thing you had to be prepared to put up with and eventually I couldn't stand it anymore.

It became too risky but I didn't blame Dave for this. He was very imaginative, but the build quality was poor. The SDX was a hugely magnificent beast and if you saw Simmons handle it, he made it look easy, being the inventor, but you'd get back home and think, “Now how did he do that?” Eventually I ended up dealing with hexadecimal code and typing in MIDI functions and it became pretty detached from music. I loved the SDX for its promise but was then frustrated by my inability to fully realise that promise.

Ultimately, the build quality, logistics and programming complexities were the reasons I stopped using electronics. I just wanted an easy life!

Earthworks was founded around electronic drums. The idea was that the drummer would play the chords - great! I was on board with electronic drums for about 15 years from 1980 to 1995. By the mid 90s, I had more or less done all that I was going to do on electronic drums. I thought it was all fascinating but it was a hard grind getting the instruments to do what you wanted them to do. And they were beginning to play all havoc with my technique and stick control.

From my point of view there are still two big problems with electronic drums today. Number one, there is no dynamic headroom; you are either immediately too loud or immediately too quiet relative to the other instruments you're playing with. An

acoustic instrument has such fantastic dynamic headroom. On my snare drum, the distance between a quiet note and a loud note is huge but on an electronic kit it's relatively small. The second problem is that I see no demand coming from the musicians for the kits to inhabit the half-keyboard, half-percussion world that Simmons and I were both lurching towards, and that would tempt me back into the market. Generally the players seem happy to have them just for practise in apartments, home recording, or doing bar and hotel gigs.

Danny Carey has done well - he had enough software knowledge, industry clout and cash to have software written for him, so he effectively has an SDX in a laptop. He has collaborated with a company called Synesthesia Corp. in LA (www.synesthesiacorp.com) who are manufacturing something like an updated version of the SDX. It's better in some ways and not so good in others, but it's probably state of the art in terms of the most advanced electronic drums for reading both positional and velocity information. It's the ability of the software to deal with both that gives the instrument some useable expression and sensitivity".

Recommended CD/DVDs

King Crimson - *Three Of A Perfect Pair* ("I really like the track 'No Warning'")
King Crimson - *Beat* ('Waiting Man' was a real high spot.")

Earthworks - 'Stromboli Kicks' from *Dig?*, 'Bridge Of Inhibition' from *Earthworks*, *All Heaven Broke Loose*.

DVD: Bruford & The Beat, Earthworks Anthology Volume 2

King Crimson – Neal & Jack & Me

There's a slice of electronic playing of mine from mid-80s up on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RyQxu7vqWqs> which I really like. The thing I'm playing at 2'06" to 2'40" became an early Earthworks hit 'My Heart Declares a Holiday'.